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Contact:

Judith Ingram, Communications Director,

*(202) 523-3240 begin_of_the_skype_highlighting (202) 523-3240 en
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, ext. 127*

WASHINGTON-The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom urges Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to press Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Gia Khiem for the immediate release of Father Nguyen Van Ly, Nguyen Van Dai, and others recently arrested for advocating for the freedoms of speech, association, and religion in Vietnam.

Rice meets with Khiem on Thursday, March 15, to discuss agreements reached during President George W. Bush's November visit to Vietnam. Since that visit, Vietnam has received Permanent Normal Trading Relations (PNTR) with the United States, been removed from the State Department's Country of Particular Concern (CPC) list for severe violations of religious freedom-an action that was premature, in the Commission's view-and joined the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Only a few weeks after gaining WTO membership, Vietnam has initiated an extensive crackdown on democracy and human rights activists.

"The timing of this crackdown-only a few weeks after getting into WTO-raises serious questions about the government's credibility on its pledges to respect human rights, including freedom of religion," said Felice D. Gaer, chair of the Commission.

Father Ly and Nguyen Van Dai have been vocal proponents of religious freedom in Vietnam.

This work has led them to press for greater democracy and legal reforms, as well as protections for the freedoms of speech, assembly and association.

"We urge Secretary Rice to seek the immediate release of Father Ly and other human rights defenders in Vietnam. Moreover, the U.S. should make the strongest possible case to the Government of Vietnam that the responsibilities of joining the international community are not fully realized by Vietnam's WTO membership. Protection for universal human rights must come first," Gaer said.

Father Ly, founder of the Vietnam Progression Party and one of the editors of "Freedom of Speech" magazine, was arrested on February 18 in Hue. He was also one of the original founders of the Block 8406 democracy movement, which started in April 2006 when hundreds of people signed public petitions calling for greater democracy and human rights.

Previously, Father Ly was arrested in 2001 and sentenced to 15 years in prison after submitting written testimony to the USCIRF, in which he was highly critical of the state of religious freedom in Vietnam and advocated that the U.S. Congress should refrain from ratifying the US-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement due to the Vietnamese Government's lack of respect for human rights and freedom of religion. Father Ly had been released in a general amnesty in 2005.

Nguyen Van Dai, one of Vietnam's few human rights lawyers, was arrested in Hanoi on March 6. He has defended individuals arrested for their religious activities, and is co-founder of the Committee for Human Rights in Vietnam and one of the principal organizers of Block 8406.

The two have been charged with disseminating propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam under Article 88 of the Penal Code. If convicted, they face up to 20 years in prison.

Others who have been arrested, temporarily detained or interrogated include Father Chun Tin and Father Phan Van Loi, Pastor Nguyen Quang, and Nguyen Cong Chinh, and lawyers Li Thi Cong Nhan and Le Quoc Quan.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Felice D. Gaer

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